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THE DRAMA IN SEMITIC LITERATURE.

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In the following paper an attempt is made to solve the problem of the position of the drama in Semitic literature and, especially, in the literature of the Hebrews. The result of the inquiry will, I believe, be almost purely negative, but the curious form which that negative result will take, the richness and strange contrasts of the literature through which the path to it must lie, and the conclusion in ethnology which it will involve will, perhaps, be found to afford a sufficient recompense for a chase which technically results in nothing. We do not want theories, however enchanting, but facts.

The substance of this paper was read before a meeting of the Connecticut Association of Alumni of Hartford Theological Seminary. This may explain its somewhat colloquial tone.

I use drama, practically, in Aristotle's sense. It is an imitation of life, consisting of an action with a beginning, middle, and end, a unity with a regular development and termination. And this action is represented by men *acting*; that is, speaking and behaving as the individuals involved in the action, and not by means of narrative. This is what separates the drama from the epic. It is sufficiently exact for the purpose, though it will be noticed that it omits many of the points which Aristotle thought it necessary to prove it. Next, by "Semitic" I mean, in the first instance, the Semitic languages. We can speak of the Semitic group of languages because these languages really are closely connected with one another, but it would be a grave error to go on to speak of Semitic peoples, because we have no warrant that the peoples which speak or spoke these languages are or were of kindred blood.

We have, then, to take these languages and examine whether in their extant literature we can find productions answering to

the definition of the drama already laid down. In the case of two, Assyrian and Egyptian, the remains are too fragmentary for any absolute opinion to be possible. Still, if there had been any Assyrian drama it is probable that traces of it would already have been found, and as to an Egyptian drama, in the exact sense, we may say almost decidedly that there was none. Ethiopic may be dismissed with equal brevity.

Next we may take Syriac—the Aramaic dialect of Edessa and the only Aramaic dialect which has attained distinct literary form and importance. In it there are no dramatic remains. This is the more curious because the Syriac literature is through and through affected by Greek influence. Not only the literature but the language itself came under the spell of Hellenic thought. It is full of words borrowed from Greek and constructions imitating Greek. Its theology, its philosophy, its history, draw upon Greek sources. Further, there were—and are still extant in fragments—translations of the Greek poets, for example, a translation of Homer. Again, it was through Syriac that Aristotelian science was passed on to the Persians and by them—and by the Syrians also independently—to the Arabs, through whom it returned to put a strait-waistcoat on the mind of Europe. Such was the circle through which Aristotle went. But despite all this, there is no drama in Syriac; its speakers did not even translate the Greek drama. From that they could not have been withheld by any religious feeling. When Julian closed the schools against the Christians and forbade them the use of the Greek classics, they set zealously to work to write epics and dramas upon Christian subjects. Then, apparently, the church and the stage were not at loggerheads. We can only, therefore, register as another fact—there was no drama in Syriac.

Turn now to Arabic. Here, if anywhere, we would expect to find what we are seeking. The Arabic literature is one of the great literatures of the world. If we measure by bulk, that in English alone could have competed with it; if by quality, making due allowance for difference in literary ideals, it still stands in the first rank. In it we find representatives, and not one or two only, but great numbers, of almost every form of literary activity

that the human mind has manifested. We have history of the world, of countries, of towns, of individuals; political science, legal science, theological science, natural science, philosophy, geography, poetry, fiction, linguistics—it would be hard to draw up a list that would exhaust the treasures of Arabic letters. But, still, there are gaps, very strange and interesting gaps, and the strangest and most interesting is the drama. There is no drama in Arabic. Within the last few years plays have appeared in Arabic translation. Thus some years ago there was published at Cairo adaptation of the *Tartuffe* of Molière into vulgar Arabic, but the strangeness of this phenomenon only serves to show how anomalous it is. Again, Burton mentions having seen stories from the “1001 Nights” given in dramatic form in the courtyard of his house at Damascus, and there have been printed at Beirut one or two such little sketches. But there is no doubt that here we have to do with Turkish and Western influence, and the point will be dealt with later. I can then only repeat that there is no drama in Arabic.

What as to Hebrew? As there is more general familiarity with this literature, more detail is here necessary. In the Old Testament, there are two books for which the claim has been set up, and is still very generally maintained, that they are cast in dramatic form, or, as some assert more boldly, are dramas. These are the Song of Songs and Job. I have used the two phrases “to be cast in dramatic form” and “to be a drama” on account of the extraordinary dislike evinced by those treating of this subject to come down to an exact definition. One is sometimes driven to suspect that commentators on these books have not carefully studied out and clearly grasped what exactly constitutes a drama. It is curious to notice a distinguished exception to this in Lowth, a scholar trained in the clear exactitude of classical schools, in his lectures *De sacri poesi Hebræorum*, and to notice further how, as a consequence, he has been accused of endeavoring to make the Hebrews conform to a Greek rule. But haze and cloudiness are no signs of depth, oftener they are signs that there is still something held in suspension, and that the process of precipitation is not yet complete. I have already

indicated what, in my view, are the essential elements in a drama. First, there must be a distinct action with a development and a catastrophe, and, second, this must be represented by "acting" and not by narrative. I do not take these as the essential elements because they are those laid down by Aristotle and exemplified in Greek literature, but because they are exemplified in all dramatic literature, whether of India, of Greece, or of modern Europe. They are common to the plays of Kálidása, of Sophocles, and of Ibsen. Starting from those, then, how are we to judge the Song of Songs? Has it an action? Is it "acted"? But we can push the question farther back and ask—is it a unity at all? The official answer is that it is a unity and has an action, but what that action may be is a point with regard to which the different exegetes are by no means at one. The view of Ewald, which at present may be said to hold the field, is that the action is the triumph of the loves of the Shulamite and a shepherd, her lover, over Solomon, his rival. But, on the other hand, there is a precisely opposite reconstruction by Delitzsch in which the shepherd lover is omitted, and the somewhat purposeless action of the poem is simply the loves of the Shulammite and Solomon. Further, Renan had a third diverging hypothesis which we need not go into, and, in fact, every investigator of the book has had his own view as to what it was about. It is to Renan's credit that he confessed with that ingenuous candor which is so refreshing in his writings as compared with those of most exegetes, that he would like to take the last chapter of the book and put it at the beginning. But there are signs that all this is passing. The venerable authority of Ewald was the real stay of the dramatic hypothesis, but now the younger men are beginning to revolt, and though the unity of the book may be maintained for some time, yet the idea that it contains an action is rapidly losing ground. I am not concerned at present to consider what the Song of Songs is if it is not a drama; that it is not a drama in any right sense is to me clear. But, yet, I would throw out the following suggestion on the constructive side, not as a contribution to the investigation of the Song of Songs, but of Semitic poetry. Take such a little song

cycle as Tennyson's "Song of the Wrens," remove from it the little thread of story that is told in the individual songs, that is, everything that comes from the outside, and leave only in them the subjective feeling and emotion of their singer, the expression, in many words, of his worship and praise of his love, and you will have such a literary product as meets us at present in the Song of Songs. Like all Semitic poetry it is purely suggestive; like all Semitic poetry it does not narrate, it registers facts of consciousness only. Thus it is dramatic in the sense that many of Browning's poems are dramatic but in no other, or it might be compared with Rossetti's sonnet-sequence "The House of Life," but further we cannot go. This canon of the subjectivity of Semitic poetry will be clearer in the case of Job.

In the book of Job we have the nearest approach to a drama that exists in the whole range of Semitic. Its writer, a man evidently of the first genius, is working in the dramatic direction and is striving to cover by pure brain energy, and in his single artistic life, the course of development which was run unconsciously in other lands by generations of poets. In Greece we can watch the tragic drama developing gradually from and round the chorus, and having its point of origin in the extemporaneous efforts of the leaders of dithyrambs. Then in the hands of Æschylus and Sophocles the dramatic action became the more important part and the chorus fell into the background. Here there was something to start from—the mimetic efforts of the leader of the dithyramb—but this possible point of departure was lacking for the Hebrew poet, he had to evolve all his conceptions at first hand and from first principles. The wonder is that he reached so clear a view of the dramatic idea, and succeeded so far as he did in carrying it out. His view was not essentially clear and his carrying out of his idea is highly defective, but he had taken the first step, and if he had found followers we might have had a true Hebrew drama. But that was not to be, could not be as will appear hereafter, and his poem remains a strange but barren variation.

But if the book of Job is a drama or if it exhibits dramatic

beginnings it must have an action, perfect or imperfect, and the question now is, where are we to look for that action and what is it? It will be remembered that in the prologue God is tempted by the accusing spirit to afflict Job. Job is afflicted but remains in ignorance of the cause of his afflictions. All this is preliminary and is cleared out of the way in the prologue. Then the drama itself begins, and if I read it rightly, the ideal end would be that Job would be brought to know either in detail or in essence what had taken place in the prologue, that his afflictions did not take their origin from sin on his part as his friends suggested, nor were they merely freaks on God's part as he himself was apt to imagine, but that they had had a definite and purposeful origin in the council of the Most High. This end is not perfectly attained; the skill of the writer is not equal to it. We feel that Job only reaches a somewhat vague conception that it is for man in all cases to submit himself before God. It is true that what we may call the second plot is carried out successfully. Job's friends are absolutely refuted—affliction does not point to sin—and Job is led to abandon his feeling that there is arbitrariness in the actions of God, but we do not see clearly why logically he should abandon it. Strictly the knot is cut by a *deus ex machine*. Job has to be brought into a certain frame of mind and the appearance of God and his speeches are the means adopted to produce it, but even so sober an exegete as Davidson feels that the method is rather hard upon Job.

This, then, is the action, but where does it take place? Here we have the crowning peculiarity of the book as a drama—the action takes place within the mind of Job, it is purely subjective. It is not in Job's speeches and his friends' answers, in the dialogue of the poem, though those speeches show what is going on within Job's mind, it is in the development of Job himself under the pressure of his afflictions. Thus we are brought again to the same phenomenon that we noticed in the Song of Songs—the subjective character of Semitic poetry.

I have already compared this development in Hebrew literature with that development in Greek which produced the drama of Æschylus and Sophocles. But we may bring it especially

close to an early play of Æschylus, the *Prometheus*. The situations are closely alike in both Job and *Prometheus*, being brought into antagonism with the divine government of the world, but stand far apart in the attitude which each takes up. Nothing could show more clearly the absoluteness of the difference between the Greek and the Hebrew points of view. On the one hand we have the clear-sighted vision and defiance of *Prometheus* with its intellectual lucidity, on the other, the groping and uncertainty of Job with his moral earnestness and outspokenness. The one has a God before whom he cannot bow and he sees that clearly; the other, one before whom he trembles, is confused and uncertain, yet ever holds fast the eternal facts of his moral consciousness. *Prometheus* is sure of himself and is sure that Zeus is a criminal; Job is sure of himself but is not certain what to think of God. We have the absolute antagonism between the intellectual and the religious consciousness; *Prometheus* thinks, but Job feels. Again, it is curious to notice that just as the purpose and aim of the book of Job is one of the great puzzles of Hebrew literature, so it is in Greek with the *Prometheus* of Æschylus. The inner meaning of the poem has been long and vainly sought and the theories are almost as multitudinous as those of the book of Job.

All this, however, is strictly apart from our subject. But it is not apart to notice that in both cases we have a simple action, that is, in Aristotle's, an action in which there is transition without either revolution or discovery. The action simply progresses, event follows event but there is no sudden change altering the whole complexion of the situation. But this has to be sharply distinguished from a "single action" drama. In Job there are two actions, the one developed in the dialogue, the discomfiture of his friends, the other and the main one, the development in Job's mind. Again, we may curiously compare the action with a type of plot developed in the most modern drama. In many of the plays of Ibsen,¹ more or less in them all, the action begins with a highly complicated and involved situation, the result of something that has preceded the play itself, and the

¹ E. G. Resmersholm.

action of the play is really to develop and make plain this situation to the audience. This is exactly like the making plain to Job what has gone before in the prologue—Job is both subject and audience. Here we see that the mental idea of a drama had not come home to the author—and how could it? He had nothing to start from—the idea, I mean, that everything that is said, is said with reference to a third party, the hearer—to make clear to him what is going on and thus to tell to him the story.

I have now dealt with the only two poems in the extant fragments of the Hebrew literature, which can lay any claim to being dramas. We have seen how far we may regard the book of Job as a drama and where it diverges. Possibly, some may think that it diverges too widely to come in any way under that category. I shall not quarrel with such a view. I shall only say here that this beginning did not, so far as our knowledge goes, develop any further. There did not arise a Hebrew drama.

Can we now assign any cause for this remarkable phenomenon, the absence of the drama in Semitic. How remarkable it is a glance at other literature shows. In India the drama has flourished from very early times. In Persia the drama has been cultivated to some extent, principally within the last century—and of pre-Moslem Persian literature we really know nothing—and it is curious to notice that it seems to have taken its origin in the Kerbela miracle plays on the death of Hasan and Hasayn. In Turkey there has long existed a popular drama in the form of puppet plays and shadow plays which were probably the origin of the recent attempts in Syria already noticed, and of some attempts in Egypt, and of late years there has grown up an immense theatrical literature consisting of translations and original imitations of French plays. The speed with which this has appeared and its general excellence show that the soil had been long prepared by the native popular plays. Of the Greek drama it is needless to speak.

With drama-producing peoples thus surrounding them in close contact with them, how was no drama developed by the Semitic speaking peoples? The idea of the isolation even of Arabia, which to so many has seemed so obsolete, is beginning

to break down. Recent investigators have sought to explain the Arab metres as due to Greek influence acting through Alexandria and its mixed civilization. But then why was the tragedy not carried with its iambic? In the first generation of Islam, Greek words were used at Mecca; what of the Greek thoughts? We have seen already how Syriac simply transformed itself under Greek influence, but drew the line at the Greek drama. Again we must ask, why? Was there something in the nature of Semitic literature which made it absolutely antagonistic to dramatic forms? This is a hard and complicated question and can only be tentatively approached. But I would put forward some considerations which may, perhaps, throw light upon it. It will be remembered that the characteristic which was found marring the dramatic character both of the Song of Songs and of Job was subjectivity. That holds of all Semitic verse. Matthew Arnold defined literature as a criticism of life; that is true in the highest degree of Semitic poetry. It is a register of the experiences of the poet. He does not show us things as they are, but as they are to him and as they have affected him. His descriptions are thus always subjective, and as an example of the same thing in English verse Browning's "*Childe Roland to the dark tower came*" may be taken. Unless you are wary and know your Browning very well, you begin to read this expecting to find a fragment of narrative or description in clear objectivity, such as is found in the old metrical romances or in the verse of Scott, or even in the Tennysonian Idyl, but it is something very different. The journey is described, it is true, but it is described through its effects upon the adventurer. It is his sensations and ideas of which we read, not the road itself. Compare it then with the description in Scott's *Bridal of Triermain*, which I am almost certain was its starting point,² where the Vaux comes to the Castle of St John. There you have objectivity. His path is

² Compare in Scott the reference:

"List how she tells in notes of flame,
Childe Roland to the dark tower came."

A comparison, too, is possible with the companion, though so different, little poem where Harold the Vauntless comes to the Castle of the Seven Shields.

described, the scene is described, you learn how he felt, but you learn this because you are told it, not because you are made to feel it through something else. Each stands clearly apart by itself. You may say, the scene in *Triermain* is in the third person, but in Browning's poem *Childe Roland* speaks. And there you have touched another difference in Semitic verse; it is in the first poem. The poet and his subject are one. I do not know in Arabic a single narrative poem. In Sanskrit, in Persian, in Greek, we have long heroic poems; in Arabic there are none.³ Take such an heroic tale as the long romance of "Antara," in which there are brought together all the traditions of the old wild Bedouin life before el-Islam. In it you will find that all the narrative is in prose, poetical prose it may be, but still prose, and as much as possible a narrator of that prose is introduced. From time to time there comes in the phrase: "So says the Kāwī, the hander-down of tradition." It is true that from time to time these come in magnificent snatches of verse, but these do not help on the story in the least. They simply record what was the feeling of one of the actors under such or such a circumstance. Antara sees in a vision the form of Alba, his beloved, and awakes and bursts into verse in her praise, but it is in prose that he journeys to the encampment of her tribe. He is challenged and insulted by some rival knight; his defiance he speaks in verse, but he avenges himself in prose. And so throughout all Arabic literature, in verse you can only set down the subjective feeling of the moment. It may involve a little description, but that description is like what we find in Browning's "Childe Roland."

Again, even a prose narrative the Arab prefers to have told in the first person. This arises from the nature of the language itself, for Semitic handles with difficulty all *oratio obliqua*. This peculiarity has been turned to good account by Professor Robertson in his Baird Lecture, where he defends the good faith of the writer of Deuteronomy even though that writer was not

³ It is curious to notice that even the stories in Arabic prose can be traced to imitation of Persian. Mohammed met with it, and in a later day we have the Persian "Hezār Afsāneh" developing into the Arabic "Book of the 1001 Nights." In the same way we have "Kalēla wa-Dimna" and many others.

Moses. Writing in Hebrew, he could not express himself in any other way than by putting the words directly into the mouth of Moses.

Now, if all this is so, it is evident that here there is no possibility for the growth of a Semitic drama. The Semitic poet has to speak for himself, and the dramatic poet has to speak for several and to develop an action through that speaking, and these two cannot come together. The fierce individuality of the desert life had left too deep a mark for the Arab poet ever to enter into the thought of another.

But there remains another question. The author of Job missed the mark, his drama as a drama is a failure, but he came near enough to compel us to ask how he had come so near. From what idea or structural form did he begin. We know how, in India and Greece, the dithyrambic mingling of song and dance developed through pantomime into speech and action and the full scenic drama. In Persia, we see it similarly developing through the lamentation for the fate of the two beloved sons of Ali, the nephew of the prophet. In Turkey, as in China, we see it developing through shadow and puppet shows. What was the point of origin in Hebrew? For that we must look again to Arabic literature. There we find a literary form that is called the *Magāma*, which may be translated "Assembly." It is an example and product of the loving care that the Arab has bestowed upon his language and is, essentially, an exhibition by the writer of his mastery of the requirements of that language. We have to picture to ourselves an assembly of educated Arabs. Some little incident is narrated or happens to them, or some point in literature or religion or linguistic science—anything of intellectual curiosity—is discussed with an elaborate minuteness in the application of all the splendid resources of Arabic in idiom, in vocabulary, in discrimination of synonyms, in literary flexibility of style. To me, the book of Job is simply a continued series of *Magāmas*. The subject of the discussion is the misfortunes of the just and their relation to God, but instead of boldly introducing it, the writer makes use of the traditional story of Job to give a living and dramatic interest to his circle as speak-

ers. Thus a stage gained not merely for an academic discussion but for pictures of life, vibrating and suffering. We are dealing with no mere abstract ideas but with present instances. Again, the *Magāma* in this case is not a monologue, as frequently, but a real discussion. The writer has cut himself sufficiently loose from Semitic trammels to be able to create the figures of each of the speakers, give each a certain individuality,—though in the case of the friends of Job not individualities differing very greatly,—and thus to touch the art of dramatic personation. Further he could not go. It was beyond his skill to set his action in motion. It remained obstinately sticking, like those constitutions which the French Directory turned out, one after the other, but which would not begin to move.

In this origin of his dramatic attempt we may find the causes of its failure. Firstly, he had begun at the wrong end—with the dialogue instead of the action. The dramas of India and Greece had begun through gesture and motion; his began through talking. Words will never produce motion; for that, motion itself is required. Secondly, we have here the explanation of the extreme length and often, in spite of the magnificence of the poetry, tiresome reiteration of his speeches. The speeches in a *Magāma* are the principal thing, or rather, they are the whole, and it is the pride of the Arab author to elaborate and develop them in order to display how happy and easy his touch in language is. I seem to feel in some parts of Job a similar artificiality, where the thought has been extended to give scope for play of language. At any rate, from such a starting point it was impossible to attain the strict dramatic ideal in which dialogue is only allowable in so far as it goes to develop the action.

Such, then, is all the drama which has arisen in Semitic literatures. It only remains to touch upon the ethnological question to which reference has been made. The Semitic languages and Semitic literatures alone have been mentioned; but is there anything in this train of thought to suggest that it may be possible to go a step farther and speak of Semitic peoples? The languages are one, is the blood of their speakers also one? If

the reasoning up to this point has been correct, there does **not** seem to be any escape from an affirmative answer. Such an extraordinary coincidence in literary attitude on a fundamental question cannot be explained by linguistic unity. It must go deeper and farther back, and base itself on a real unity of race. And if, in the future, it should ever be found that a people speaking a Semitic dialect had developed an independent drama or had not shown in their literature the quality of subjectivity so marked in that of the Arabs, it would go far to show that the people in question was of a non-Semitic stock. I conceive, then that the fact that the speakers of Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, and the other Semitic dialects had no native drama is a weighty proof that they were of one blood and one origin.